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# Critical Consideration of the Notion of 'Language' and 'Beyond': 'Beyond the Self' and the Issue of 'Transcendence' in E. Levinas

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*The purpose of this research is to consider the problem of 'transcendence' in language from the viewpoint of 'dialogue' in E. Levinas' thought. This research is related to a series of papers written by Paul Standish, on the confrontation between continental philosophy and analytical philosophy from the standpoint of philosophy of education. So far, this problem has been studied from different angles with a view toward a cultural exchange between East and West. However, by considering the problem of the meaning of language, I will try to find the other way different from the way to the argument about 'mutual exchange' in the assumption of 'mutual/common understanding' down the name 'cross-cultural understanding'. In consequence, I will indicate that 'dialogue' is the process to deepen 'self-awareness' through the understanding of others, not just a verbal communication.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *Philosophical Investigation*, Wittgenstein discusses philosophers as language users:

When philosophers use a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 41).

These sentences express the essence of Wittgenstein's perspective for studying the relation to language of human subjects. This paper tries to discuss the possibility or impossibility of *saying*. We explore the diversity of understanding and the limits of understanding surrounding language and human subjects. This study addresses 'dialogue' for considering the problem of transcendence in language from the viewpoint of Levinas' thought. The problem is that a deep conceptual valley separates 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' or 'theory' and 'practice' in the background of philosophical tradition. The present study examines (or explores) a series of papers written by Paul Standish (London University) on the confrontation between continental

philosophy and analytical philosophy from the standpoint of the philosophy of education. To date, this problem has been studied from different angles with a view to cultural exchange between East and West. This approach ignores the problems that pertain to languages with fundamentally different cultural and religious backgrounds. The problem of the meaning of language is differently handled by continental philosophy and analytical philosophy, which are the two great schools in the development of European philosophy. This approach strives to find another way different from the way to the argument about 'mutual exchange' in the assumption of 'mutual/common understanding' down the name 'cross-cultural understanding'.<sup>1</sup> On this point, Standish argues that it is important for us to know the limits of language in searching for something beyond the self or language. To examine his perspectives in detail, this paper examines (or explores) the relationship between 'beyond' and 'language' in the thought of Standish and 'transcendence' and 'dialogue', in the work of Levinas (1906–1995).

In *Beyond the Self*, Standish's discussion approaches the details of the human subject and seems to appreciate the great suffering and pain that man receives through the drama of life. To him, philosophy does not manage to give us advanced, intellectual information, but rather human information in relation to the being of the reflective self. The philosophy offers not only some educational influence as a practical activity in daily life, or as philosophy as education; it offers some response to the question that man asks in the process of life, the 'How does one live?' question of philosophy in life. The approach specifically examines the transmission form of 'wisdom' as a response to the question to life—the existence question—rather than the transmission form of 'knowledge' as intellectual information. The transmission form of knowledge does not respond to the question of life. The present study separates it as either 'wisdom' or 'knowledge', but suggests that it is more important to consider it from the viewpoint of dialogue or translation. In the transmission of 'knowledge', 'Mutual understanding' between a talker and listener is important, given the assumption of the same cultural context. On the contrary, in the transmission of 'wisdom', each is required to dialogue with the language in itself—self-consciousness to own language—beyond 'mutual understanding'. Then, the problem of how to use or hold an attitude related to the terms of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' oriented to integration of the ancient philosophy, and the problem of a new view to language on the assumption of the dialogue are proposed to us by consideration of the transmission form of 'wisdom'.

Based on that hypothesis, it is necessary to ask again the following question regarding the meaning and the meaning of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'. That is a remarkable problem seen especially in daily educational practice on criticizing the confrontation of the two perspectives; the practice is advanced, intellectual information transmission. Otherwise, the practice is related to formation of human being, or the self. On this point, Standish describes that it is important for us to know the limit of the language in searching for something beyond the self or language. The following paragraph presents an examination of dialogue and language from the concepts of Levinas.

## II. BEYOND DIALOGUE

The philosopher finds language again in the abuses of language of the history of philosophy, in which the unsayable and what is beyond being are conveyed before us. However, negativity, still correlative with being, will not be sufficient to signify the *other than being* (Levinas, 1974, p. 9).

Contemporary philosophical studies are characterized by each subject. The majority of the subject, addressing existence, others, unconsciousness, sensitivity, and others, belong to a pre-language stratum in which a unity of analytical technique and meaning are not achieved. The language holds the key to that series of studies. Levinas' view on language denied looking at the object while standing or relying on a certain standing. He practiced the rule of thinking simultaneously in two different languages. About ontology, morality, and politics, he was thinking in Greek, and about ethics in Biblical Hebrew. This is not to say that one language translates another language, but that he did not seek separation from the inevitable, tense relation to which *distance* and *proximity* of the world of two languages. The practice of Levinas was an attempt to obviate symbolization by ignoring cultural, social, and religious background that each language has under the name of understanding, but, away from the frame and revelation, the language as opaque in the field of daily practice to become the text as the text in itself, maintaining the constant, tense relation. Besides, Levinas describes other 'dialogue' beyond the limits of 'dialogue' as follows: 'beyond dialogue, a new maturity and earnestness, a new gravity and a new patience, and, if I may express it so, *maturity and patience for insoluble problems*'. 'The presence of persons before a problem. Attention and vigilance: not to sleep until the end of time, perhaps' (Levinas, 1995, p. 87). In the context of Levinas' ethics, the dialogue is not asking us for 'Mutual understanding', but restating a new aspect of human maturity and sincerity. It is important for us to understand the meaning of 'transcendence' in considering the meaning of 'beyond'. In Levinas' thought, 'The other' is an assumption to consider 'transcendence'.

Levinas describes 'transcendence' in the opening of *Otherwise Than Being* as follows:

If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the event of being, the *esse*, the essence, passes over to what is other than being. However, what is Being's other? Among the five 'genera' of Sophists a genus opposed to being is lacking, even though since the Republic there had been question of what is beyond essence. Furthermore, what can the fact of passing over mean here, where the passing over, ending at being's other, can only undo its facticity during such a passage? (Levinas, 1974, p. 3)

In this passage, Levinas denied the directionality to the good, a directionality that exists inside the Platonic fixed expression. What matters to Levinas is not 'transcendence', but 'ex-cendence'. Whereas the former implies advancing movements toward a certain purpose, the latter represents passage over the outside.

Levinas said that 'the Other' means 'transcendence', which does not mean that 'the Other' is made purely of something new or unprecedented. Conversely, he said this because newness

emerges from 'the Other'. For this reason, the notion of newness contains seeds of transcendence and its meaning. To Levinas, 'transcendence' does not mean self-growth or progress to a better self, but the movement itself, a movement of coming outside. In this sense, a person of transcendence in Levinas is not someone who is in higher order with some power. It is, rather, someone who is exposed to 'the Other' in a boundary situation. We must grasp the meaning of 'vulnerability' and 'hospitality' on the assumption of the meaning of this 'transcendence'.

Consideration of the problem of 'transcendence' in language has a great importance in re-considering and saying the problem of 'transcendence' in Levinas' thought. From such a viewpoint, the discussion of the meaning of 'transcendence' in *Beyond the Self* seems problematic in the following sense: the meaning of 'transcendence', and the notion of incompatibility in the book connotes that the self has priority to the others, especially in the conception of the awareness to others or 'humility' to others as the attitude.

In 'beyond Autonomy' of Chapter 5, 'passivity' is a key issue. First, Standish describes an outline of Autonomy, then points out the problem of autonomy: the problem is the individual as an agent using autonomy. In other words, 'Autonomy, like other ideals, offers a standard' (Standish, 1995, p. 177). The author attempts reconstruction of the concept of autonomy here while quoting a perspective of Allen and Lloyd. However, regarding passivity compared to the labour of the monk, the way to find some kind of value in manner or posture, as the devotion (the passive experience) presents no room for doubt. It might be the problem that is contained in finding value or giving reasons. Heidegger said that the possibility of self-transformation could be realized only in the passive posture as to be waiting while always trying to dissolve the obviousness. However, the problem in this point is 'passivity' without responsibility for something suffering. Might humility, as virtue about something beyond the self, or creating receptivity, solve this problem?

The ethics that Levinas elaborates is a plan to find the origin of moral obligation in a tendency of the sense of the pain of others. This is not the world of 'as. . .' means, to pretend to 'put oneself in the situation of somebody'. Furthermore, if I paraphrase what Levinas said, 'saying' is not dialogue but to express that I suffer from the others, and it connects with the following question, 'What kinds of dimension in Ethics will relate to humility as behaviour to the others involve infinite responsibility?' The ethics Levinas described is to expose autonomy of the subject to a question by 'the Other'. A criticism has been made that 'The more I feel that responsibility, the more I cannot move'. For such a criticism, the argument of the autonomy in *Beyond the Self* is significant because by opening every possibility, the human subject can choose something among them autonomously. At the same time, to be opened in every possibility is to expose autonomy of the human subject to others.

### III. PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVE

This study clarified the following: 'dialogue' is the process to deepen 'self-awareness' through the understanding of others, not just a verbal communication. Moreover, the dialogue is the practice of making the defined language resonate with everyday life or reality; the translation based on such a dialogue also seems to have the meaning of a new semantics by becoming the

resonance of the language with a different meaning. When we translate with the aim merely of ‘mutual understanding’ in a philosophical text, or, in other words, when we come to spend time only on ‘Exegesis of a sutra’ (a venerable teacher), a philosophical investigation will lose the perspective that is expected to be cultivated. It will be reduced to a faithful apprentice who imitates, only in pretense, the mouthings of the master who brandishes an esoteric Buddhism jargon. Consequently, it is important to discuss the possibility of philosophical dialogue in this research. The possibility of a philosophical dialogue as the search to ‘Meaning of the life’ and ‘Live well’ is in the following: Diving deeply to the assumption of the word (word that has been defined) that has already been spoken by parting from the language in daily life once, and re-considering and saying the revelation of human subjects who is the assumption of the language use. It is of weaving the process of traffic coming and going to ‘daily life’. Similarly, the difference brought by management of translation developed over a philosophical text makes the reader stand as alterity before the question of life.

We are alive in the age when the value of ‘interactivity’ is naturally, excessively, and defencelessly evaluated by the spread of rapidly advancing internet technology. The tendency to value ‘unity’ and ‘solidarity’ that can be mutually understood from easily bridging distance and the cultural barriers has appeared and disappeared in the background of the value. The problem of this study in the future is clarification of a philosophical meaning about the relation between media literacy and human subjects, for whom ‘interactivity’ is achieved by trying to ask for a modern meaning of the thought of Levinas. Furthermore, the following is clarified: the dialogue is the process not to deepen the self through trying to understand the attitudes of others, but also to lead the self the dimension of ‘self-awareness’. Moreover, the dialogue is the practice of making the defined language resonate with everyday life or reality; a translation based on such a dialogue also seems to have the meaning of a new semantics by becoming the resonance of the language with a different meaning.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. SOME QUESTIONS BROUGHT UP IN THE FIELD

The followings are responses to the questions that I was not able to answer in the discussion.

Moyra Fowler’s response to my paper helps to reconsider the problem of ‘being beyond the self’ as ethics, in relation to the other. If I undertake the question delivered from her to me in my own way, it is as follows:

The only means by which an autonomous human being can journey beyond the self through a relationship with the other (Fowler, 2008).

In the expression of ‘a relationship with the other’, we should notice that the term ‘with’ does not imply the way of being ‘symmetrical’ (such as sympathy or cooperation), but that of being ‘asymmetrical’. In other words, ‘a relationship with the other’ in Levinas’ thought suggests ‘the other is always preceding the self’. Then, about the phrase Fowler sited, “teaching” comes from the exterior’, it is necessary for us to reconsider the relations between ‘teaching’ and ‘understanding’, and the excessive of ‘teaching’ in leaning.

The role of the teacher itself lends additional authority to that which is spoken while the willing student remains open to and engaged in that learning (ibid.).

For instance, about the relation between 'teacher' and 'student', it is easy to find out that 'teacher' on the side of 'teaching' precedes 'student' on the side of 'understanding' in the process of 'learning'. If, however, the relation between 'teacher' and 'student' is replaced with the relation between 'I' and 'the other' in educational event, its obviousness might collapse. (For example, when a teacher is exposed to the otherness of a student, the teacher's self is opened to the world.) Such perspectives will be to some extent useful for considering the complex situation of present education.

Another question was asked to this paper by one of the participants.

'When you use the term "understand", your understanding of the term is insufficient. The etymology of "understand" is "under"-"standan", it is not to grasp meanings but to stand under someone. Our recognition works out by "understanding". The term (apprehend, comprehend, etc. besides understand) that means "understand" is not necessarily critically taken'.

I thought that this question was unexpected, but reasonable to be raised. And, I was going to answer the question based on the main discourse in which the term 'understand' was limitedly used in the context of the confrontation between the analytical philosophy and the continental philosophy, and of the argument of 'intelligibility' in Levinas. However, I didn't feel this really answering the question. I think that what is exactly at stake in this question is an assumption of a certain common understanding from exterior. Assuming that our recognition is based on our understanding, we voluntarily recognize the world by understanding. Various researches of language might bring solution to a complex statement, 'I understand the term "understand"'.

The dialogue around the term 'understanding' deepened the content of my paper. I think that this dialogue shows the model of various discussion brought out by some problems that Levinas proposed. I want to think about the problem of 'transcendence' as an attempt to enrich the dimension of this question through dialogues with different cultures in the future.

## NOTES

1. The suggestion of deep research was made by Toshihiko Idutsu, who investigated the problem of conversation from the viewpoint of Zen Buddhism.
2. A series of philosophical studies by P. Standish (Institute of Education, University of London) and N. Saito (Kyoto University) is expected to create the possibility for such a dialogue and translation between English and Japanese over philosophical text.

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